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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

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WEINREB, Esther

Dear

I am sending this written history, a moment of my life, to share with you some memories which will be with me forever. I have written them down because I feel it is the duty of every survivor to bear witness to the unbelievable horrors which we were forced to endure and also to keep in our hearts, and in yours, the remembrance of those who cannot speak for themselves.

BERL WEINREB

Oct. 2000

Dear Memoir Project Members:

My husband, Bernhard Weinreb, who lived from 10-23-20 to 10-17, 94, had as the passion of his life that the Jewish people who died should not be forgotten.

He wrote these memoirs over many years and sent them, particularly, to the young people in his life.

I hope you will use what he wrote.

Esther Weinreb
178-07 69 Ave.
Flushing NY 11365

718 544 1832

MY MEMORIES OF THE TIME OF THE HOLOCAUST:
GHETTO VILNO SEPTEMBER 12, 1943

As members of the secret underground partisan organization in the Ghetto, under the name F.P.O. (United Partisan Organization), my girlfriend Kayla and I received orders on September 11th to prepare ourselves, to be ready: tomorrow night would be our turn to escape from the Ghetto. Nothing else was told to us. We did not ask any questions--where? and how?

We had to report by 6:00 P.M. to Straszuna Street No. 6. There we would get further instructions. We were told not to carry any packages, pictures, documents. We were allowed to put on two or three layers of clothes. The reason for no pictures or documents was that in case we got caught, the Germans would not know where we came from. During the month before, a group of partisans had escaped from the Ghetto; they were ambushed by the Germans while crossing a bridge. Some were killed; some escaped. On the dead bodies the Germans found pictures and documents from the Vilno Ghetto. They came to the Ghetto, arrested all the members of the families, and all of them were shot in Ponary.

In the Ghetto, Kayla's father Abrasha was the liaison between the F.P.O. and the Ghetto chief, Jacob Gens. Before the war, Abrasha was a member of the Communist Party and the F.P.O. therefore appointed him to this position in the Ghetto.

I knew from Kayla that Abrasha's cousin was friendly with a group of wealthy Jewish people who built a hiding place at the outskirts of the city in Belmont. A Gentile couple agreed to help this group (I am sure they were paid for it). They built a house underneath a house. The lower house had electricity, water, ventilation, toilets, etc. They built wooden bunkers for 30 to 40 people and food was stored which could last a long time, like potatoes, beans, dry bread, and more. I knew that in an emergency Abrasha would be able to use this hideout (Maline).

In the evening I came to Kayla's family to say goodbye. We were sitting in silence, not knowing if we would be successful. Then I asked, "Abrasha, what will happen with my mother in case the Ghetto will be liquidated?" Without even thinking, as if he were prepared for it, he said, "Berele, take my daughter Kayla. Take care of her. Whatever will happen to my wife Nadzia will happen to your mother. I promise you."

Later, when I came to my room, where I lived with my mother, I

As members of the secret underground partisan organization in the ghetto, under the name F.P.O. (United Partisan Organization), my girlfriend Kayla and I received orders on September 11th to prepare ourselves for the next day. Tomorrow night would be our turn to escape from the Ghetto. Nothing else was left to us. We did not ask any questions—where and how?

We had to report by 5:00 PM to Bursztyn Street No. 6. There we would get further instructions. We were told not to carry any packages, pictures, documents. We were allowed to put on two or three items of clothes. The reason for no pictures or documents was that in

case we got caught, the Germans would not know where we came from. During the night before, a group of partisans had escaped from the Ghetto, they were ambushed by the Germans while crossing a bridge. Some were killed, some escaped. On the dead bodies the Germans found

pictures, documents, etc. The next day the Germans searched the Ghetto. In the Ghetto, Kayla's father, Abraham, was the liaison between the members of the Communist Party and the F.P.O. Therefore, he carried the message to this question in the Ghetto.

When Kayla and Abraham's cousin was friendly with a group of western Jewish people who built a hiding place at the entrance to the Ghetto. Kayla's cousin agreed to help the group. The group was told to go to the entrance. They built a house underground. They

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could last a long time. The police, German, and more.

In the evening I came to Kayla's family to see goodbye. We were sitting in silence, not knowing if we would be successful. Then I said, "Whereas what will happen with my mother to leave the Ghetto will be

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Later, when I came to my room, where I lived with my mother,

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told her that I was escaping tomorrow. I said, "But Mamele, Abrasha will come and take you out in case of trouble. Trust him, go with him wherever he'll take you." My mother's reply was, as always, "Berele, I lived my life already." (She was 43 years young.) "All I want is for you to survive." It was a long, long night. The last night with my mother. I loved my mother very much---but I could not help her.

On the day of the liquidation of the Vilno Ghetto on September 23, 1943, Abrasha kept his promise to me. He lived in the Ghetto in the same room with his parents. But he could not take them with him. He picked up my mother and, with his wife, walked with them through the underground sewers until he reached the outside territory. Then he went with them to the hiding place and the Gentile couple, who knew him, allowed them in.

Among the people hiding in this house were the "cream" of the Ghetto population, including Salek Dessler, who was at that time the police chief in the Ghetto. Rumors were that Dessler worked for the Gestapo. Abrasha told me after the war that he did not know that Dessler would be hiding in this place. Abrasha made sure that all was okay with Nadzia and my mother in the hiding place.

The liquidation of the Ghetto was still going on. All over the city were Gestapo, Lithuanians, Ukrainians. It was too dangerous for Abrasha to go out yet. He had to wait 3 or 4 days until things cooled down. His orders had been to report to his group. After a couple of days of his absence, the leaders of the F.P.O. declared him a deserter and sentenced him to death.

When he was able to leave the hideout, he decided to go East, where many partisan units were stationed. The group he joined was a special parachutist group of Russian partisans stationed in the Kazian Forest, about 200 to 250 km from Vilno. Meanwhile, in Vilno the Ghetto was liquidated. The rest of the Jewish people, about 10,000, were sent out in freight trains to labor camps in Estonia. Only 2 small Ghetto camps remained in Vilno: "H.K.P.," a unit to fix auto machinery, and "Kailis," a fur factory which supplied soldiers on the front with fur coats to protect them against the cold winters in the east.

As I was told later, Salek Dessler had a friend, a Jewish policeman by the name of Friedman, who used to run errands for Dessler on the Aryan side. One day the Gestapo followed Friedman to the hideout. The house was encircled with Gestapo soldiers. They broke in, arrested everybody except one person. This was my mother. She hid under a bed and when everybody was gone she climbed out and tried to reach Kailis Camp---maybe they would save her. Late at night she came to the camp. At the gate entrance was a Jewish policeman by the name of Telerant;

he was a close friend of mine before the war. Of course he knew my mother, and he let her in inside the camp. He saved her life for a while.

The Gestapo, as a gesture to all the Jewish people they arrested in the hideout, took away only Dessler. The rest of the people they brought to Kailis. Nadzia and my mother met again.

Meanwhile, Kayla and I, with a group of 25 members of the F.P.O., successfully escaped from the Vilno Ghetto. We arrived at our destination, the Narocz Forest Lake, on September 19, 1943. Our feet were bleeding from 7 nights of walking. It would be impossible to describe our feelings at that time. After years in the Ghetto, losing our families, friends, suffering hunger and humiliation, we were ready to start a new chapter in our lives as Partisans in the forest. Our aim was to pay back the Nazi beast for all they did to us and to our people. But things did not work out our way. 5 or 6 days after we arrived in the woods, we were told that the Germans, Lithuanians and Ukrainians had started a blockade around the forest. They encircled us with the intention of killing all of us in the woods. I am not able to write in this article what happened, but Kayla and I survived the blockade. Many, many partisans were killed.

February 15, 1944:

I lost my girlfriend Kayla. She was arrested in Podbrodz, a village 50 km from Vilno. At that time, I was sure she was killed and decided to return to the territory of the Narocz Forest. After a while I found out that Abrasha was alive and was with a group of partisans at the Kazian Forest, about 100 to 120 km from where I was then. I wanted to see Abrasha very much. I asked my commander for permission to go, and told him my story. The commander gave me permission but warned me of the danger of walking alone such a distance at a time like this. But nothing could scare me. I had a map and compass. I also had my gun. It's interesting when I look back to this time to realize that I did not know the meaning of fear, maybe because we had nothing to lose, or maybe it had to do with being young and living every day in fear.

While walking a day or more alone on a small road, I saw a man walking in my direction. He was limping. Not knowing who he was, I slowed down. As the person came closer to me, I was sure I knew him. We looked at each other and I recognized him. It was Chaim Basok from Vilno. His face was black and blue and on his arm he had a sling. "What happened, Chaim?" I asked him. "I was beaten up by a group of Russian partisans while I walked by myself. They took away my gun. When I protested, they beat me up. Without a gun I cannot return to my unit." (Gentiles were accepted in partisan group without arms, but not Jews. For a Jew to join a group, he had to have a gun.) I told him where

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I was going, and the two of us decided to join up and go together. He knew Abrasha also. At least I was not alone. We were ~~travelling~~ ^{walking} at night because the days were dangerous. For food we stopped at isolated farms. It was easy for us to get food because I had my gun, and for a gun the farmers had respect.

After 6 or 7 nights of walking, we arrived at the Kazian Forest. I knew the name of the partisan group but not the location. We met some partisans, asked around, and eventually were told where the group was camping. On a highway near the forest we were stopped by a partisan. He pointed his machine gun at us, asking who we were and where we were going. It turned out it was a post from the group we were looking for. I gave him Abrasha's name and my name. He knew Abrasha. We waited about 15 minutes. I saw a man come out of the forest. I was not sure who it was. He carried a machine gun over his shoulder and a revolver on his hip. As he came closer to us, we started to recognize him. I lost myself: What will I tell him? I'll try to explain to him it was not my fault. I promised to take care of Kayla and I did not keep my promise. How will he react? It's his daughter. I started to cry loud. I kneeled down and cried and cried. Abrasha came over to me. "Berele," he said, "I'm ashamed of you. I'm disappointed in you. I'm not the only father who lost his daughter. You are not the only young man who lost his girlfriend. We are in a war. Millions of people are getting killed. We don't have time today, Berele, to cry. Go back where you came from and if we'll survive we'll meet after the war. Then you'll tell me what happened." He turned around and went back in the direction of the forest.

There was nothing I could say anymore. Chaim Basok and I turned around, saying to ourselves, "Zog nit kein mol oz du geist dem letzten weg."

We started to walk back to the Narocz Forest, to our unknown tomorrow.

MARCH 1944

Berl Weinreb.

Berl Weinreb

I would like to explain what made me write this chapter of my life. Every time I start to turn back the pages of my life, memories return--terrible memories.

A couple of weeks ago a friend of mine called me. We were together in the Ghetto and the F.P.O. and he was with the Partisans when Abrasha was declared a deserter and sentenced to death. He had just found a tape that I talked into many years ago. There I told the story of Abrasha; how he saved my mother at that time and where he "disappeared" the 4 or 5 days. We should understand that it was war time and if every underground fighter had, instead of reporting to his or her unit, gone somewhere else to take care of family, this was against the War Law.

After he left the hideout, Abrasha decided to go East to the Partisans. He joined a special group of Russian parachuters in the Kazian Forest, about 200 km from Vilno. In conversations with Partisans, he never explained where he was during those 4 or 5 days. Later on, the sentence was overlooked, but his name remained "not clean."

My friend asked me if I would be willing to write this article in order to clear Abrasha's name. Of course, I accepted.

Abrasha Kryzowski - Kaplan.

After the war he emigrated to Vancouver, Canada, to his brother. He changed his name to Kaplan, married a young lady from Vilno, Ida Shack, and, as in his previous marriage, had two daughters. He died in 1985.

Kayla Kryzowski

She was arrested and interrogated on February 15, 1944 by the police chief, who tried by torturing her to make her talk. This was in the village of Podbrodz. But Kayla was raised in an atmosphere of the Komsomal, the youth group of the Communist Party. She did not tell anything. If she had told where I and the group were, we would have been arrested the same day. Then the police chief decided to send her to Vilno, where the Gestapo would make her talk. They took her to the infamous Lukishki Prison in Vilno. At that time in Vilno there was a young Jewish man by the name of Niki Dreizin. The Germans kept him alive. His job was to interrogate Jewish people caught on the Aryan side. He used to beat and torture them, trying to find out if they came from a hiding place, which Gentiles kept them, or if they were Partisans. I was told later that Dreizin came to the prison to interrogate a young Jewish girl who was accused of being a Partisan but did not talk. But when he saw Kayla, knowing the position of Abrasha, and knowing me, he decided to let her go. Possibly he thought that if he'd survive the war we would put in a good word for him. He sent Kayla to the Kailis Camp, and there Kayla met her mother and my mother. They were shot 3 days before the Liberation, with the last 300 Jewish

people to be killed before the Germans retreated from Vilno. Their bodies were not buried. The Germans did not have the time to bury them, but they had time to kill.

For people who read books about the Holocaust, it is hard to realize the risks a Jew took every minute of the day. We were not allowed to bring a piece of bread for the families into the Ghetto. We were searched at the entrance gate. We used to hide the piece of bread (if we had it) under our arms or between our legs. If the policeman at the entrance discovered it, we were finished--beaten and killed. We were not allowed to walk on the Aryan side; we had to wear the yellow star on the front and back where it could be seen--if we walked without the star it meant death. We could have no contact with Gentiles. But we had to survive. We took chances. Many died taking chances. When I mention in this story that I decided to go here or there, it was not simple. The Germans, Lithuanians, Ukrainians were all over. On every road, bridge and highway they watched, always looking for Jews. Many Jewish people were caught wandering, looking for places to hide. Everybody took a chance. We really became heroes every day without considering the consequences. It seemed that the war was only against Jews.

At that time if I had known that my mother and Kayla were alive in Kailis, NOTHING I MEAN NOTHING would have kept me back from going to Vilno to try to rescue them.

I have a large library of books, mostly about Jews, the Holocaust, Jewish resistance against the Nazis. I have read these books again and again. As years go by, it becomes harder for me to understand how people could be so cruel to other people, how they could in cold blood rip apart a baby in front of its mother. How could they burn us alive? How could they be so cold, so cruel, to order the people to undress before shooting them? To put shoes on the shoe pile, eyeglasses, children's clothes in separate piles? This to save work later. And then, to shoot them for no reason...the only reason because they were Jews.

After the war, we survivors used to meet, talk, analyze the past and the future. Most of us lost everybody. It was like awakening after a bad dream and realizing it was not a dream--it was reality.

After long debates we came to the same conclusion: there will not be wars for a long time. Too many people got killed. People will learn how to live with other people and, the main thing, anti-semitism will disappear. We will not be hated any more. We paid our price already. This was our opinion. How wrong we were! 46 years after the war, so much hate--hate in every part of the world, especially against Jews. We survivors worry about our children and grandchildren--will they learn anything from the past? We worry and hope that history will not repeat. In 120 years from

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now" the survivors will be gone. It will all be history. We survivors all live with the memories of the past all the time, and as long as we live we will never forget.

This is the price WE paid for surviving.

New York, December 1991

Berl Weinreb

Berl Weinreb

MY ESCAPE FROM GHETTO VILNA SEPTEMBER 12TH, 1943

After being in Ghetto approximately one year, I was approached by a friend of mine to join the underground in the Ghetto. I was recommended by a member and was approved. We had to be sworn in.

The organization called itself F.P.O.--UNITED PARTISAN ORGANIZATION. We met daily after we came back from work to receive reports and instructions. The reports consisted of news from the fronts received from the outside world. The F.P.O. had an illegal radio in the Ghetto.

SEPT. 1ST, 1943: The German S.S. and the Lithuanian Police surrounded the Ghetto. Nobody was allowed to go out to work and nobody was allowed to enter the Ghetto. We were told that the Gestapo had come to liquidate the Ghetto and send out the remaining Jews to Estonia in labor camps. Early in the morning a courier from F.P.O. knocked on my door, saying, "LISA RUFT." This was our code in case of emergency. I got dressed and went to Strashuna Gas (Street), where all the Underground members were to meet. There I met for the first time people--friends whom I knew and used to meet every day but I did not know that they were also members of the F.P.O. The F.P.O. commander, Abba Kovner, held a speech explaining the situation to us: "Comrades, members of F.P.O. The time has come to defend our honor and our lives. This time we will fight like our brothers and sisters fought in the Warsaw Ghetto." Guns, grenades and Molotov cocktails were distributed among the fighters. We owned two machine guns. They were placed on two balconies. Everybody was ready to fight the enemy, knowing that we would not come out alive from there. The spirit was high and we were not afraid any more.

The Germans came into the Ghetto. When they reached the Strashuna Gas, one of our group opened fire on them, ^{German} and they retreated. But a German soldier came up another street. The fighters did not see him, and he placed dynamite by the wall and blew up the house where the fighters were. One of my friends was killed and the rest retreated.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gens, who was the Ghetto Chief, had meetings with my girlfriend's father, Abrasha, who was the liaison man between the F.P.O. and Mr. Gens. According to the report we received, Gens was against fighting. His reason was that 300 young boys and girls could not fight the German army and for trying to do it the whole Ghetto would be killed.

Gens made the F.P.O. an offer: Don't fight; I'll help you escape.

The leadership of the F.P.O. accepted, because the Ghetto population were saying, "On account of you boys and girls the Germans will kill the rest of us." At the time, about 2,000 people had been removed from the Ghetto and sent to Estonia.

Gens kept his promise. He gave Abrasha the keys to a small gate which led to the "outside world." The agreement was that only members of the F.P.O. would be allowed to get out through this exit. (How naive we were. We really could have saved many more lives.)

SEPTEMBER 11th, 1943: I was informed to prepare myself. Tomorrow I would get out together with my girlfriend Keila. We were ordered to destroy all our papers, I.D.'s, pictures, because if we got caught there would be no trace of the Ghetto, because the Germans killed whole families if they caught a Jew escaping. We had to look nice--clean clothes, Keila had to put on makeup, our shoes were polished--and to look like a happy couple going to or from a party.

The hardest job for me was to tell my mother that I was leaving her in the Ghetto. Until this day we were not allowed to tell anybody about our belonging to the F.P.O. I told my mother everything. Abrasha, as one of the heads of the Underground and the Communist Party, promised me, "Berele, what will happen to my wife will happen to your mother." I told my mother to do anything Abrasha would tell her. "Gel gezunderheit, mein kind. Maybe you will survive. I'm already an old woman; you're still young." (She was 43 years old.) I told her from which house we were going to leave, and the approximate time. "But, Mamele, I will not be able to talk to you. We were ordered not to speak to anybody when we leave the house."

At 3:00 P.M. I went with Keila to Strashuna #6. We put on a double layer of clothes because we were not allowed to carry any packages. My mother watched me getting dressed, knowing we would never see each other again.

Our group consisted of 25 people. In our group was the famous poet, A. Suckewer; the writer-poet S. Kacerginski; my partner Sol; Shloma Kowarski; Manny Kobrin; S. Palewski; and more. We were all very nervous. After being in the Ghetto from Sept. 6, 1941 to Sept. 12, 1943, a very long two years, we were walking out. Nobody spoke. We were all silent, involved in our own thoughts. At 5:00 P.M. we were told to get ready. We had to remove the Jewish stars from our clothes, clean the place where the stars were sown on. A member looked us over and every three or four minutes a couple left the house. When our turn came, I was given a gun, Keila a grenade, and they also gave me a violin case which contained the parts of a machine gun. I checked out my gun and we left the house.

My mother was in the street. She stood still, not saying anything. Our eyes met. When we came to the end of the block I turned around to look at my mother for the last time; she was there.

Years went by and, strange, I remember my mother only the way I saw her when I turned around escaping from the Ghetto.

We came to the small gate of Jatkowa. Abrasha was there. He opened up the gate, saying to me, "Berele, take care of Keila." He closed the gate behind us, waiting for the next couple to arrive.

We found ourselves in the "outside world." It was Sunday evening--people dressed up, walking happily, talking, laughing, and we---we came from hell. Keila took me under my arm. We spoke in Polish, trying to look like a couple in love on a Sunday evening. On every

corner were Lithuanian policemen and German S.S. stopping people and checking their I.D. cards. We tried to avoid them in order not to get caught. Our destination was the Jewish cemetery about two miles from the city. The F.P.O. stationed a couple of girls on the way to the cemetery in order to let us know if the "coast is clear."

We arrived at the cemetery when it was already dark. Usually, I would be uncomfortable to find myself in a cemetery at night among the graves, but our fear disappeared. Shadows started to move. "Lisa Ruft. Lisa Ruft." We all arrived. Nobody was missing. The leader of the group held a short speech. "Comrades, members of the F.P.O. From now on, we are no longer 'Ghetto Jews.' We're a group of Partisans, ready to fight the Nazi enemy. If we will die, we will die with dignity. Let's take revenge for the blood of our men, women and children who were killed by the Nazis."

We took the machine gun out from the violin case. We put it together. Everyone checked out his or her arms, which were not hidden any more in a pocket or inside a coat. Our mood improved. We were not afraid any more. We were ready for the next chapter in our young lives. We were Partisans.

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Abrasha kept his promise regarding my mother. On the day of liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, he took his wife and my mother and led them through the sewers into a hideout in the city. Unluckily, in the end Abrasha's wife, Nadzia, my mother, and Keila died together in a camp not far from Vilna three days before the end of the war. When Vilna was liberated, their bodies were still unburied in Ponary.

Berl Weinreb

April 30, 1989

MEMORIES OF YESTERDAY..
SHARED TRAGEDIES .

NEW YORK 1988

BY BERL WEINREB

As members of F.P.O. (United Partisan Organization), an underground group in the Vilna Ghetto, we escaped on September 12, 1943. Our aim was to reach the territories in White Russia where the Partisans were concentrated, to join them and to fight against the Nazi murderers. . There were about 25 fighters in our group; most of us carried arms, and guns and grenades.

We knew that although we were still in danger we no longer were afraid of death, as we had been in the Ghetto. At least now we would have a chance to defend ourselves and possibly kill Nazis. After seven nights of walking, hiding during the day in swamps, forests or lonely farms, we reached our destination and joined the Partisan groups who were operating from their bases in the territories of White Russia.

A group of Russian Partisans--musicians, singers and dancers who traveled from village to village giving free patriotic and propaganda concerts to the Partisans of the local population--asked me to join them.

In Vilna I had been a member of an orchestra which was part of a public school called Shul-Kult. On many occasions we gave concerts, particularly on Jewish holidays like Lag B'omer. We used to lead the children through the streets of Vilna, take them to the nearest forest to enjoy a day in the country. During the Ghetto years I played in the Ghetto Symphony Orchestra. In the Partisans we were unable to organize a regular orchestra because of the sounds from instruments. The nearby enemy could hear and we might be discovered.

Our group in Russia consisted of singers, dancers, and light accompaniment. I was able to get a small accordion, taught myself how to play it, and became a member of the musical group.

June 1944. We have been liberated now; our lives are no longer in danger.

We are realizing that very few of us survived. Most of the Partisans were sent home. Everybody was happy "they" were going home. We Jews know there is no place for us to go, no home, no family, no friends. What will we do? Will we remain at the graves in Vilna? Maybe somebody survived? Only time will tell...

Our group was ordered to continue the propaganda concerts for the population, and also for any group of Red Army soldiers we might encounter (who were headed west, in order to liquidate the German Nazi criminals).

I was quite pleased with my temporary occupation. Deep in my heart I was afraid to go back to Vilna and face the horrible reality. I had learned that my mother, for whom I had prepared a hiding place in the city with Gentiles prior to my escape, was discovered by the Germans. My mother was the only person who managed to escape. She reached a Jewish camp called "Kailis" which still existed in Vilna. A friend of mine, a Jewish policeman named Telerent, recognized my mother and let her in the camp, where she was killed 3 days before liberation. She was killed together with my girlfriend, Keila Kryzowski, who had escaped with me to the Partisans. By accident she fell in to the Germans; they sent her to the same camp where my mother was, and she died together with my mother.

I remained alone with my terrible memories. In the meantime, our musical group continued to travel, from town to town, from village to village. As always, I continued to look for Jewish faces. On rare occasions I would meet a Jewish man or woman who had survived by some miracle. We always found a common language--our tragedies brought us together immediately. We would sit for hours pouring our hearts out to each other, remembering our families and friends who were killed; we spoke about our towns and cities before the Holocaust, our Jewish life, our youth. We spoke about how we lived,

planned, dreamed, and in the end everything was destroyed. Why? We opened unhealed wounds, still fresh in our hearts and minds, trying to understand what had happened, why it had happened.

July 17, 1944. Lebedev, a small town not far from Vilna. Our group stopped here. Before the war the majority of the townspeople were Jewish. I wandered around through the town, hoping to find Jewish faces. All in vain--I could not find a single Jew. Evening arrived and as usual my heart was heavy. I was hoping to find another Jewish person, someone to sit down with, talk to, cry with, listen to and exchange our tragedies, so at least for a couple of hours my pain would be eased temporarily. But there was no one to talk to here. I sat down on the porch of the house where we were stationed.

Across the street several trucks stopped and a group of Red Army soldiers got out of the trucks. They were going to clean up, eat, rest up for the night before moving on the next morning. As I watched them from across the street I wondered, should I approach some of the soldiers and ask if anyone of them is Jewish? I could not do it.

Suddenly an idea came to my head. I would take my accordion and play some Jewish melodies, hoping that if there were any Jewish soldiers they would react to the music.

I started to play Eli-Eli.. Suddenly...an officer who was shaving himself stopped shaving and, with a towel over his shoulder turned in my direction, started to walk in my direction, crossed the street, came over and sat down next to me. Without saying a single word, we sat silently as I played. He watched me, looked at me; he did not interrupt my playing. Suddenly the silence ended. In a clear "zaftik" Yiddish he said to me, "Please play a little louder. We have several Jewish soldiers in our group. I'm sure they would like to listen to Jewish melodies, which they certainly did not hear for many years." I felt the hunger we all have and share for our

heritage and tradition. We sat together for a long time. He told me his story. He was a Major in the Red Army, was born in Minsk. Before the war, Minsk was a major Jewish city, where the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture was at its prime. He had recently passed through Minsk, where he had left his wife and two children at the start of the war. They were killed in the Minsk Ghetto. His sister and brothers went into the Army to fight the Nazis. Some other relatives joined the Partisans. Their fate was yet unknown. The only survivor of his large family was one cousin he had located in Minsk who gave him the news about his family.

He kept on repeating that he did not understand how the horror could have happened. Why did it happen? Why?

As I listened to him I thought that I too could tell him my tragedy, about my mother, my friends who were killed, about my beautiful Vilna where I grew up, my Yiddish city with the Jewish intelligentsia, organizations, synagogues, theaters, orchestras, etc., etc., hundreds of years of Jewish life, Jewish culture, a beautiful Jewish youth all gone. From 70,000 Jews, a handful of us left as witnesses. Our punishment for surviving would be a constant reminder of what happened. Why did we survive? I told him of my life in the Ghetto-Vilna, of my life in the Partisans-- I told him everything...he listened to me. We suddenly became very close to each other, as if we had known each other a lifetime. Our mutual tragedies brought us together.

It was getting late. He had to rejoin his group--they were leaving in the morning for the front. We kissed each other goodbye, wished each other good luck, embraced like good old friends. We both cried. Somehow we felt a little better.

My "friend" crossed the street. It was dark; he started to disappear in the darkness of the night, until I could not see him anymore.. And I? I remained again alone. Alone with my thoughts and memories of the dark days of yesterday and the unknown tomorrow.

THOUGHTS OF A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

Whenever we survivors come together, in the end we have only one subject that is the focus of our attention: "The War Time." Everyone tells a chapter, an episode, of his or her own horror story. Our stories will never end. We have so much to tell--ghettos, concentration camps, partisan groups, hiding places (malines), families that we lost forever. We want to talk about it always. How could it happen in a world as educated as our world? When we meet for the first time, we have so much in common, so much to compare. Where did you survive? Did any one of your family survive? How did you survive? We feel a closeness to each other. Something binds us together. We are brothers, sisters, friends, family.

We talk, talk endlessly. Time is growing shorter and shorter. Who will talk and who will listen after we are gone? Who will be interested in our horrors? The world? No. Where was the world when they burned and gassed us to death? We were alone then and we are alone now. The children? Yes, we must tell them, we must talk to them over and over again. They grow up in a normal world, a normal life. How much they would like to understand it. In most cases, it is history. How can they feel what we felt when our mothers were taken, our fathers, our children, our relatives, to certain death? Taken away to be killed. We would like to warn our children--to listen, to learn and to understand how brutal and inhuman people can be to each other. Hitler was not the first one and will not be the last one to kill Jews. Warn our grandchildren, tell them the horrors. Don't be afraid to scare them. They should be forewarned. Maybe if we had understood the situation then, more of our people would have survived.

The most painful subject for us to talk about, always, is the children that the Nazis killed. Some of our friends still "celebrate" their children's birthday. Every year they remember how old their child or their children would now be. We all live with our memories.

I am now a senior citizen. I have lived my life. I have my wife, my children, my grandchildren. Yes, my grandchildren. I love them so very much. Can I protect them? I remember, in the Ghetto Vilno, the auctions and selections. Right, left. Who should live. Who should die. Jews were lined up at the exit gate, holding their loved ones tightly, because, they were told, the ghetto had to be disinfected for health purposes. This was the time of selection. The Germans and the Lithuanians separated the mother from the child. Mother to the right, child to the left. Children torn away from their mother's arms, thrown into large trucks like bags of garbage, the children screaming, Mommy, Mommy, the mothers helpless. They could do nothing. Yes, they did have a choice, they could do something, they could go together with the children. Many did and many did not. Everything happened so fast that before they realized it the Germans and Lithuanians, beating them, "Schnell, Schnell, du dreckische Juden (Fast, fast, you stinking Jews)" We younger people tried to stop the mothers from giving up their lives with their children. Don't give up your young life. You are too young, maybe you will survive; then you will have a chance to build a new family. We tried to tell them, "Don't go with your children. Survive. Fight. Fight." Yes, yes, many mothers let them take away the child or children and some went with them, in order to be with them till the last minutes of their lives.

Today, I live and I am a father and a grandfather. I ask myself the question many times: Could it ever happen again? If yes, would I let them take away my David and Molly from me, or would I go with them (if I would be given the choice) and not leave them alone in these horrible hours. Oh, yes, I would not hesitate. If I could, I would go with them.

Terrible, terrible thoughts. Maybe we as young people were right to resist. Some of the young mothers may have survived, rebuilt their families. What would they have if they gave up their own lives?

It was a horrible time in history. So many books have been written. Can they ever describe the feelings of the mother who let them take away her child? Never, never. These mothers live a life of grief till the end of time.

Therefore, it is no surprise when we survivors get together. Our memories, our sufferings, bind us together. We talk and we talk. Maybe this is the price we must pay for surviving?

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Berl Weinreb

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